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Now China

What an eerie world we live in. Less than 24 hours after Nikita Khrushchev is relieved of power in the Soviet Union, the event is punctuated by the first nuclear explosion ever detonated by China. Superficially, the events have no connection. It is hard to believe either that Peking was privy to the Kremlin maneuverings or that the explosion was cranked up after Mr. Khrushchev's fate became known. But on a deeper level, the explosion symbolizes Khrushchev's inability to keep the Communist world united, loyal and friendly to Moscow.

The American effort to take the snap and the surprise out of the Chinese explosion, by advertising it in advance, may help dampen its immediate propaganda value. But the detonation remains a capital achievement for a country supposedly primitive and prostrate just a few years ago. The device's military menace is negligible, given the huge task of devising the vehicles to deliver them. But the political effect can only be to enhance the image of power which China is desperately trying to project in Southeast Asia, at Moscow and around the world.

For the United States, and presumably for the Soviet Union as well, China's baptismal blast vastly complicates the world scene. It renders more difficult their separate efforts to contain and control local military ambitions and conflicts, and it brings closer the day when Peking may feel compelled to prove that it is not the "paper tiger" which it accuses other nuclear powers of being. On the part of Washington, the explosion will require steady nerves and a continuing, quiet display of resolve to uphold American responsibilities in Asia.